

VZCZCXRO9313  
PP RUEHROV  
DE RUEHDS #2749/01 2801320  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 061320Z OCT 08  
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2246  
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 3574  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0462  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEPADJ/CJTF HOA PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 002749

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2018  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [MOPS](#) [ET](#) [ER](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM INSIDE ETHIOPIA'S ERITREAN REFUGEE  
CAMPS

Classified By: CDA Deborah Malac. Reasons: 1.4(B)(D).

¶1. (C/NF) Summary. Acting RefCoord and PolOff visited the Eritrean refugee camps at Shimelba and My-Ayni from September 15 to September 19 in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, and met with Eritrean refugees, UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) officials, Ethiopian Administration for Refugee/Returnee Affairs (ARRA) officials, and NGO workers. UNCHR and ARRA officials said that approximately 400-500 Eritrean refugees were entering Ethiopia monthly, and that all new arrivals were being sent to the newer camp at My-Ayni unless the refugee already had family in Shimelba. They said that the population of Shimelba was declining as a result of thousands of refugees leaving on their own to seek opportunities elsewhere. The population of My-Ayni was increasing with the new arrivals, and could reach capacity within two years if the current rate of Eritreans fleeing to Ethiopia continues. UNHCR and ARRA officials said there was no Eritrean opposition activity in the camps that they were aware of, but Shimelba refugees insisted that the opposition controlled all activity within the camp and was actively recruiting new members from the camp population which is predominately male.

Kunama refugees said that the Kunama opposition, the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK), was against the U.S. resettlement program, and was actively discouraging Kunama from participating by painting life in the United States negatively. More generally in the region, newly placed landmines on the roads remain a continuing hazard as two people were killed and a third person was wounded on September 15 when a commercial lorry hit a landmine on the well traveled road between Shire and Shiraro. Emboffs passed at least a dozen Ethiopian military camps while traveling, and noticed minimal military activity in the western border area. Lastly, EmbOffs observed a strong Chinese presence in the region with an estimated several hundred Chinese road engineers, many of whom were working side by side with Ethiopian laborers. End Summary.

Eritrean Refugee Flow into Ethiopia Steady  
-----

¶2. (U) UNHCR and ARRA officials said that approximately 400-500 Eritrean refugees have been entering Ethiopia per month on a consistent basis. The officials stated that once refugees cross the border they are typically picked up by Ethiopian military or police officials and then taken to one of several collection points along the border. From the collection points, ARRA transports all Eritrean refugees to the registration site at Inda Baguna where they are screened by ARRA and Ethiopian security officials. Once registration

is complete, all refugees are taken to the new camp at My-Ayni unless they already have relatives at the Shimelba camp.

13. (U) An ARRA official at Inda Baguna said that refugees typically stay at the registration site for no more than three days, but those who are perceived to be a threat stay longer for additional screening. He said that a refugee might be considered a threat if they can establish that a refugee has a criminal background or if they are believed to be a "subversive" of the Eritrean government. The official declined to say what happened to a person if they were determined to be subversive. ARRA maintains an office and three small compounds throughout the small city of Inda Baguna where refugees are housed. The refugees are restricted to the compounds and not allowed to wander the city. EmbOffs visited all four locations and observed that each of the housing compounds was no more than a few small rooms, too small for the number of occupants, with wall-to-wall mattresses on a dirt floor.

#### Shimelba's Population Dwindling

-----

14. (U) UNHCR officials in Shire said that with the U.S. resettlement program, and the fact that not all Shimelba residents would be resettled, the future of Shimelba was uncertain. Nevertheless, the population of the camp was continuing to decline because most new refugees were being sent to My-Ayni, and thousands of refugees had left the camp since the beginning of the year attempting to find better

ADDIS ABAB 00002749 002 OF 004

opportunities elsewhere on their own. Following a revalidation of the camp population, UNCHR reported that as of July 31 the population was down to 9,606 individuals from an original estimate of 18,010 people. However, one refugee thought that fewer people would leave the camp now that the U.S. resettlement program had become public knowledge hoping to be resettled.

15. (U) Shimelba's population is primarily divided between Tigrinya and Kunama refugees, each with their own section of the camp, with a small number of other minority groups. The Tigrinya section includes what camp residents refer to as "downtown" where industrious refugees have established income generation activities that consisted primarily of well stocked bars, cafes, pool houses, video shops, and grocery kiosks. The camp is approximately 15 miles from the Eritrean border, and is open with no security perimeter making movement in and out of the camp easy and uncontrolled.

#### My-Ayni Expected to Grow Quickly

-----

16. (U) UNCHR reported that as of July 31 the population of My-Ayni, which was opened in May 2008, was 1,149 people, but unofficially as of mid-September ARRA officials assessed that the population exceeded 2,000 individuals. UNHCR estimated that My-Ayni's capacity was somewhere between 9,000 and 10,000 individuals suggesting that with approximately 400-500 new arrivals a month the camp could reach capacity within two years. My-Ayni's perimeter, like Shimelba's, is open, but unlike Shimelba which is isolated, My-Ayni straddles a major north-south artery making it easier for refugees to obtain transport and leave the camp.

#### Eritrean Opposition in the Camps?

-----

17. (C/NF) UNHCR officials declared that they were unaware of any Eritrean opposition activity within Shimelba, though one Protection Officer noted that some Tigrinya refugees had requested urban relocation due to opposition harassment in the camps. ARRA officials stated that opposition activity within the camps was not permitted, but a handful of Shimelba

Kunama refugees insisted that, in fact, the opposition "controlled" activity within camp and moved in and out freely. They also alleged complicity between ARRA and the Tigrinya and Kunama opposition. They said that the Kunama opposition, DMLEK, ensured that all elected Kunama officials to the refugee council were either DMLEK members or sympathetic to the opposition. According to the refugees, DMLEK used intimidation tactics to force compliance from uncooperative refugees by threatening to use DMLEK's "relationship" with both ARRA and UNHCR to ensure that the offending individual "would never leave the camp." One refugee, after refusing to join DMLEK, claimed he was arrested by the Ethiopian police on a trumped up charge and held for several weeks. Another refugee, who was a veteran of both the Eritrean liberation struggle and the 1998-2000 border war, said that when he arrived in Shimelba, ARRA offered to send him to Addis Ababa, and provide him with a vehicle, if he agreed to work in the opposition's radio station. When he refused he was told he would never be allowed to leave, and that he would never be resettled. Another refugee said that the largely Tigrinya "Sedeg'e" opposition group tried to force him to join by telling him that if he did not, he would never leave the camp. (Note: Sedeg'e is also known as the Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front (ERDF), and is one of the three groups that joined together to form the Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF). The DMLEK and the ENSF are both members of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA). End note.)

18. (C/NF) The refugees said that armed persons could often be seen in the camp. They said sometimes the armed persons were local Tigrayan (i.e. Ethiopian) militia, but other times the armed men were opposition. The refugees said that some DMLEK members had family living in the camp and would come and go regularly. (Note: PolOff saw several armed Tigrayan militia walking through the camp at various times.)

19. (C/NF) PolOff could not find any Tigrinya refugees who

ADDIS ABAB 00002749 003 OF 004

would speak as openly as the Kunama, but the Kunama refugees said that the Tigrinya were dominated by Tigrinya opposition groups just as the Kunama were dominated by DMLEK. The Kunama refugees asserted that some Tigrinya refugees regularly left the camp to receive military training for short periods of time, and then would return. At one point during a conversation between PolOff and contacts in the camp, the contacts visibly stiffened, and warned PolOff that they were under observation by what they termed as a "politically active" Tigrinya refugee.

#### Kunama Opposition Against Resettlement

-----

110. (C/NF) The Kunama refugees also said that DMLEK was opposed to resettlement of the Kunama refugees, and therefore, pressuring people not to resettle. The refugees stated that DMLEK wanted the people to stay to be used as a resource, and wanted the young men to join their organization to fight Eritrea. They said that DMLEK was spreading misinformation about life in the United States including showing the movie "Roots," alleging that the Kunama would be treated like slaves in America. One refugee noted that in the last year, positive reports from Kunama who had already resettled were beginning to counter DMLEK's negative message.

#### Newly Placed Landmines a Continuing Danger

-----

111. (C) On September 15, a commercial lorry detonated a probable anti-tank landmine at 08:00 hrs on the road between Shire and Shiraro killing two people in the truck and critically wounding a third passenger. The mine was placed within one kilometer of an Ethiopian military camp, and local security officials assessed that the mine was placed the night before, intended to catch early morning military

traffic. No group has yet to claim responsibility for the attack, but local security officials speculated that Eritrean supported insurgents were responsible. UNHCR officials said that the Ethiopian military uses local Tigrayan militia to check the roads each morning for mines, but the militia's methods are believed to be crude and far from comprehensive. An ARRA official at Shimelba told PolOff that whoever was placing the mines did not want to close the road, but simply to remind Ethiopian authorities that the insurgents continue to operate. The official also criticized UNHCR's security practices noting that UNHCR makes too many unnecessary trips between Shire and Shiraro, and drives too early in the morning before the roads have been checked. The September 15 incident is the first reported landmine detonation in this area since December 2007, but it is possible that previous incidents could have gone unreported.

#### Ethiopian Military Activity Minimal

-----

¶12. (C/NF) During the course of the week, EmbOffs passed at least a dozen Ethiopian military camps in what is one of Ethiopia's most sensitive border areas near the disputed town of Badme. EmbOffs observed minimal military activity in the camps where soldiers could be seen playing volleyball and soccer throughout the day, and little military traffic on the roads. Soldiers walking along the road, and in village bars and cafes, were most often not in full uniform, and engaged in recreational activities. Local NGO workers said that the area had been generally quiet with no unusual military activity in recent weeks.

#### Chinese Flags Flying in Tigray

-----

¶13. (U) While traveling between Axum and the refugee camps, EmbOffs observed Chinese engineers working along side Ethiopian laborers on the roads, and in the various Chinese worker camps and road construction way stations EmbOffs saw People's Republic of China flags flying sometimes alone, and sometimes along side the Ethiopian flag. For example, every few kilometers between Axum and Shiraro Chinese engineers were building culverts and grading and widening the roads. On multiple occasions EmbOffs also saw likely Chinese engineers being driven around in Ethiopian military Toyota

ADDIS ABAB 00002749 004 OF 004

Landcruisers. As a testament to the number of Chinese in Tigray, many of the children in the villages called out "China, China" when EmbOffs passed by, rather than the typical Amharic "ferengi," meaning foreigner.

#### Comment

-----

¶14. (C/NF) The presence of Eritrean opposition activity in the camps was not surprising. The defensive tone in EmbOffs discussions with UNHCR, ARRA, and international NGO officials suggests that they had a vested interest in denying any knowledge of it, otherwise they might be required to address opposition harassment of refugees. The visit was yet another reminder that a priority of ARRA's refugee program was to address Ethiopia's national security concerns with Eritrea. Post cannot confirm complicity between ARRA and the opposition groups, but we do note that ARRA, as an organization, falls under the purview of the Ethiopian National Intelligence Security Service. End Comment.  
MALAC